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ABSTRACT

Most of the mechanical and content errors in the sentences written by journalism students can be attributed to four faulty patterns that can be traced to errors in the thinking process: fragmented sentence parts, personification, bureaucratic coding ("officialese"), and compressed sentences. While acceptable in spoken communication where clarification can occur rapidly, sentence fragments in writing cause redundancy, errors in the use of phrases and clauses, and lack of agreement between subjects and verbs or pronouns and their antecedents. Personification, a form of bureaucratic language that gives things human characteristics, results in incomplete thinking and inaccuracy in writing because it does not allow thoughts to follow a logical pattern. Somewhat related to personification, coded language is the result of using words to hide, rather than to convey, meaning. Such messages rely heavily on abstract words and ideas, as well as on lengthy sentence structure. In an attempt to reduce codes to journalistic style, some students tend to overcompensate by compressing the essential thoughts out of a sentence. Correcting these faulty thought patterns involves a basic understanding of sentence parts and concentration on the construction of simple declarative statements. (MAI)

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IDENTIFYING CAUSES, NOT SYMPTOMS, OF WRITING PROBLEMS

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Presented to the Secondary Education Division, Association for Education in Journalism Annual Convention, Seattle, Wash., August 1978.

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A chandelier lights up two hand-carved chairs from all over the world.

Wallaby then had the snorkel truck saw another piece of the roof out.

He added that he and the faculties discussed the possibility of counteracting decreasing enrollments by implementing strategies toward the successfulness of the academic programs at NIU.

Smith and Jones were both catchers and pitchers.

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As instructors in newswriting courses, we must deal daily with scrambled sentences like these and with the young writers whose skills have become equally scrambled. We can untangle a particular sentence by dissecting its grammar. We can assign newswriting models to emulate. We can grade and instruct and patiently wait while the novice practices and matures.

Why do such sentences persist? Is there no clear pattern to these errors? Is grammar always the culprit?

We have discovered through our analysis of such sentences a pattern does exist. Most errors in content and mechanics can be traced to errors in the thinking process -- faulty thought patterns. Sentences are scrambled because thoughts are scrambled. The problem is compounded in journalism where writing must be concise: Sentences must telescope ideas, words must describe and news must inform the widest possible audience.

The instructor's work becomes even more complex when learners are imprinted with the spoken word. Writing is almost alien to many students. Today's generation of young must work doubly hard to translate the spoken word into the written word. When young reporters first try to translate the events of "what happened" into the words of their first stories, they drown in a sea of ideas strung together in scrambled words and phrases. They make grammatical errors that shock even them.

How can we get them from "here" to "there"? We waste too much time correcting grammar. Such errors are symptoms of the problem. The cause is incorrect thought patterns.

PURPOSE

Our purpose is to identify errors in the thinking process that lead to content and mechanical errors. We wish to grapple with the cause, not the symptoms of writing problems.

Instruction in journalistic writing often focuses on symptoms because they are easy to identify and teach. Errors in grammar are identified, sentences are reordered and, slowly, the story emerges in the correct style.

To speed that change, we must recognize students' problems as translators of speech. Only after years of experience do reporters think in sentences. Beginning reporters think in single words or sentence fragments, in images that pour into the brain through the senses. Much of the news comes to them via speech.

PROBLEMS IN THOUGHT PROCESSES

Student reporters' experiences with spoken language cause problems in thought processes. Grammatical errors, convoluted and fragmented sentences, redundancies and dangling modifiers stem from speech patterns that rarely bother the listener. In print they are unacceptable. The spoken word creates the first problem for beginning reporters.

A second writing problem results from personifying. "Egypt said today..." is an example of personification, giving things human qualities. Egypt cannot speak, we insist. "The university decided..." No, it did not, because it cannot.

The third problem for student journalists is the vocabulary used by public figures. It is imprecise, deceptive, ungrammatical; it is bureaucratic coding. Sometimes it is not English, but a melding of Greek, Latin and Anglo-Saxon. Student reporters, like their sources, often write in abstract words that no one, including the original speakers, the reporters, editors or readers, possibly can understand.

Novice reporters' attempts to condense wordy sentences and complex ideas cause a fourth writing problem. Because students experience discomfort in their unfamiliar roles as translators, they tend to overcompensate. Trying to compress ideas into short, pithy sentences, students often squeeze ideas clear out of the sentences.

For example, the reporter who wrote this tangled sentence lost its thought and inadvertently replaced that poor lost thought with one not intended. "The

money," a reporter wrote, "Will be used to remove ammonia nitrogen from the waste water..." True, some people, even economists, think that is about all money is good for these days -- to sop up ammonia nitrogen from waste water. But that idea is not the one the reporter intended to convey. The money, he meant, would be used to purchase equipment that would remove the nitrogen.

We believe scrambled sentences persist because thought processes get tangled by extemporaneous speech, personification, bureaucratic coding and compressed sentences. By identifying these four basic problem areas, we can attack the causes of scrambled sentences and change student reporters' faulty thinking. Miraculously, the symptoms begin to disappear. Redundancies vanish. Students recognize and laugh at their own misplaced modifiers. Agreement in numbers appears in the writing. Students become acquainted with their cogent Anglo-Saxon language. They recognize a sentence that is missing its thought.

IDENTIFYING FRAGMENTS

We begin our attack on scrambled sentences by dealing with sentence fragments, phrases and fleeting images that serve as sensory messages to the brain. Most grammatical errors stem from thought fragments. Instructors too often insist students examine sentences in their parts -- phrases, clauses, subjects, verbs, pronouns and antecedents. Most likely the parts are essentially correct, but are strung together in the wrong order. Then instructors lead students from part to part until they stumble over an error. Students must be made to recognize these parts as contributions to a whole.

The reporter who wrote the sentence at the beginning of this paper, the one about two hand-carved chairs from all over the world, discovered for himself two chairs simply could not come from all over the world, unless they were assembled from some monstrous conglomeration of pieces.

Urged to examine the parts of a sentence as elements of a whole, students begin to understand such incongruities as this one: "Some of the students, who were mostly black..." Such coloration, we remind them, is quite improbable. They begin to admire the impossible logistics posed by the action described in this sentence: "Residents told police of a man flashing his body at two different places Saturday afternoon in less than one hour time." The writer of the following sentence promised us he never would do it again: "I love to show people things who are truly interested."

Unscrambling these sentences becomes easier when we identify errors as parts of a single incorrect thought pattern. Thinking in fragments results in writing in disordered fragments. Once students recognize their natural tendencies to think in fragments, or even single words, they begin to examine phrases, words and dependent clauses so they can reorder them into simple declarative sentences. In the process, they begin to reorder their thinking.

Fragmented thoughts lead students into redundancies. The student who wrote this sentence was unaware of her problem: "The problem of mice dying in an unattainable area does pose a problem." Even when she reread the sentence, she did not see the problem. Our favorite went something like this: "City Hall will be closed today," said Bolen. Bolen said, "Employees will have an extra holiday." A redundancy, we repeat, is a Bolen Bolen.

Thinking in fragments causes disagreement in numbers, sometimes between subjects and verbs, sometimes between pronouns and antecedents. The reporter who wrote this sentence had one word in mind when he should have had the whole sentence in mind: "Complete driver's license facts comes from the Secretary of State's office." The word in his mind was license. Unfortunately, that word was not the subject of the sentence. The subject was facts. Blithely unaware of the plural subject, he chose a singular verb, comes, to go with the

word in his head. The result was a mistake in subject-verb agreement.

Beginning reporters use pronouns with no apparent acquaintance with antecedents. This sentence is a typical example: "If a person has a large overdue bill, they can pay it over a period of time." Problems with pronouns are linked to speech. Sloppy pronoun reference is acceptable in speech. Not so in writing. Students must be introduced to antecedents and must recognize sloppy speech patterns do not belong in print.

An amazing number of ungrammatical sentences are cleaned up and errors evaporate when students recognize that a single thought process is at fault. Once they understand the human tendency to think in phrases, single words and sentence fragments, they consciously can revise their thinking. They can begin to process the fragments into sentences until, eventually, they will think in complete sentences.

Fractured speech, necessary for rapid communication, imprints young writers. They are impressed easily by bureaucratic language. The bold truth is such language is coded to serve a purpose -- deception.

An adversary relationship cannot exist if one of the adversaries is looking the wrong way. Journalists cannot be effective watchdogs if they are thrown off track. And that's what bureaucratic language does. It sounds good until it is analyzed. Sounding good becomes a writing standard to journalists who think more in the spoken than in the written word.

IDENTIFYING BUREAUCRATIC LANGUAGE: PERSONIFICATION

A form of bureaucratic language occurs when writers give things human characteristics. The problems with this practice have been overshadowed by pressures on journalists to produce, and to produce fast. It's easy to say "The Soviet Union today warned the United States against producing the neutron bomb." Problems created by sentences like this are greater than the slight

sacrifice in speed required to make the example acceptable. When journalists personify things, they separate themselves from people, the real source of news. This is a risky practice.

Consider what happens when sentences like our example are printed or broadcast. The obvious problem is the Soviet Union is a country, a thing incapable of warning anyone about anything. Similarly, the United States is a country incapable of receiving a warning. Let's examine further. Through an interview, an official handout or a leak, the reporter found out that at least one Soviet official doesn't want American scientists, businessmen and government officials to mass produce the neutron bomb. By mentioning what is implicit in our example, we greatly expand a simple declarative sentence that contained no specific reference to people. But at least four groups of people were referred to indirectly: Soviet officials, American officials and American scientists and businessmen.

The example above shows the problems inherent in personifying things: Such sentences ignore people, the essence of reporting. This results in illogical sentences -- all for the sake of speed. Because of this basic problem, others occur. Unfortunately, personification is so widespread students have trouble identifying it. Frequency is taken to imply accuracy. It's like the old moral principle that if you do something wrong often enough, your conscience stops hurting, and your mind stops realizing the act is wrong.

When we asked a student who personified virtually anything, (committees, offices, reports, universities) why he thought he did this, his reply indicated he had formed the habit years ago. He said his sources talk that way; he has trouble recognizing personification as a problem, and it's faster to say something like "the university decided," rather than "officials at the university decided."

Let's look at the absurdities produced by valuing speed more than accuracy. A student of ours wrote that Scott sees a double standard existing on campus, and he will take this argument into Dodd's office. We don't know how a double standard is an argument, but we've discussed that type of phrasing problem already. What concerns us now is that darned double standard existing on campus. Do double standards bite? Is that why enrollment is declining? And why will the argument willingly go into Dodd's office? Don't arguments fight?

A student reporter wrote that when the administration building, Lowden Hall, was completed, Cain's office moved in, along with many other administrative offices. Perhaps they had an office party. We wonder if they invited Cain.

What bothers us is when these sentences are read to our classes, the students often can't tell what's wrong. The problem is too common to be recognized as a problem. Students often don't realize the absurdity of these sentences because they have become immune to the lack of logic in such composition. They read personifications each day and build a resistance against recognizing this form of writing as a serious problem.

Personification encourages incomplete thinking. Thoughts are not followed to their logical conclusions. For students who think in fragments, personification aggravates this problem in their thought processes.

If the problem could be corrected by rote memorization, we suggest it would be less frequent than it is. Students don't seem to have the thought processes that cause an alarm to ring when they read a sentence in which a thing has been personified. Consequently, students' copy editing and proof reading don't cause corrected sentences. If the problem were a lack of editing, we think sentences such as the following would have been changed:

---The second question asked how the case was affecting the university.

---The program is trying new ideas in course offerings.

---The house, which has moved many times since it was built, was used as a float, a play house and now stands as part of a museum.

Up to this point we have discussed the problems inherent in personification. Now we will examine the dangers that are a part of this process.

When Russia is warning the United States, or the university is announcing or offices are moving, news becomes reports about things, not people. No person is held responsible for the news. No one can be questioned. This bureaucratic tactic allows news sources to become news managers. Whom can a reporter question about "the university's" decision to raise tuition? News sources become lost in the bureaucratic maelstrom. This irresponsibility complicates the process of ferreting answers to questions raised in a news release or a press conference.

The more difficult it is to hold people accountable for actions that affect others, the easier it is for those people to act irresponsibly. Reporters must not allow people to hide behind the cloak of bureaucracy. If this happens, we allow our sources to be like the Wizard of Oz. He was a meek and kind person unable to accept the responsibility of his position. He felt he lacked legitimacy and authority, so he hid behind his fire and smoke creation. His proclamations, like those of many, were nothing but hot air. As Dorothy and her friends found out when they discovered the Wizard's game, it's easier and more rewarding to talk to a person than to a thing.

Too often reporters, especially student reporters, are like the cowardly lion when facing the Wizard. They accept what is told them because it comes from a person in an official institution. Only in law are corporations or things considered to be people. In reporting, this practice is intolerable. If a reporter will accept what "the government" or "the board" said, then that reporter is a step closer to being used in the public relations function of any bureaucracy.

Reporters who are not irritated when they hear what Israel said today are reporters whose thought processes will allow them to rewrite a press release and call it reporting. Both actions result from inabilities to see logical fallacies, a lack of desire to question and a failure to realize that people, not things, are responsible for the news.

In other words, journalists satisfied with bureaucratic language can't perform their roles as adversaries. Their heads have been turned from news, which is people, to the institution's handout, which is control of the reporter by those in the institution.

We can turn again to our first example, the one about the Soviet Union warning the United States not to produce the neutron bomb, to discuss the extent of the danger of personifying things. Before the days of instant international communication, ambassadors relayed information from the heads of one government to the rulers of another. The lines of responsibility followed the lines of communication: from ruler to ambassador. Today's press conferences heard 'round the world have changed that. In many cases, rulers have used the press conference to convey messages ambassadors used to carry. Consequently, a head of state can speak simultaneously to those whom he rules and to virtually every ruler and every subject in the world. Here's where the problem can begin. The reporter who writes "The Soviet Union said today..." conveys less information than the ambassador did. Who in the Soviet Union said that? Brezhnev? Kosygin? Who knows? Without more specific information, the United States, whoever that is, cannot react responsibly.

It is easy to overexaggerate the importance of this point. Nevertheless, the dangers of media diplomacy were shown in the early stages of the Sadat-Begin peace talks. You might not be familiar with those because they've more commonly been called the Egypt-Israeli peace talks. But we prefer to put credit or blame where it belongs.

When a reporter writes "Egypt said today..." readers have no indication of the credibility of that reporter. This is another problem inherent in personifying things. The reader in Youngstown, Ohio, has no idea if "Egypt said" means "a press release from Egyptian officials said," or "Egyptian President Anwar Sadat said," or "The Egyptian defense minister said" or "Some washed-up Egyptian political hack said." The use of "Egypt said" is an easy way to cover sloppy reporting. For the lazy reporter, "Egypt said" is salvation. It allows him or her to stay in the office and not do the legwork necessary for a complete story. The use of "Egypt said" prompts a mental attitude conducive to lazy and irresponsible reporting. This is the essence of our argument against personification: It's irresponsible.

IDENTIFYING BUREAUCRATIC LANGUAGE: CODING

As we said earlier, personification is one of the problems resulting when the spoken word has to be translated into the written word. Another was phrasing, and a third is coding. It has been called bureaucratese, officialese, textbookese, double-speak, new-speak or no-speak. Coding results when words hide, rather than convey messages. Bureaucrats' codes are just as effective as spies' codes. They keep most people from knowing what's happening.

There's a close tie among problems resulting from personification and those resulting from coding. That tie is the common cause of the two problems: bureaucratic language. A bureaucrat's everyday language is loaded with personification. As we said, endowing things with human characteristics hides the news source. Personifications hide identifiable individuals in large, cumbersome and unresponsive social structures. Especially under deadline pressures, it becomes easier for a reporter to accept what the "State Department said" than it is to find out who in the State Department said what.

Administrators know reporters can be manipulated by feeding them a handout shortly before deadline. The "right" officials just happen to be on hand to discuss the release, to elaborate, to help the reporter write an "in-depth" story. The problem, of course, is "right" officials for bureaucrats often are "wrong" officials for the public. Well-trained bureaucratic underlings will seem to answer reporters' questions while a bureaucracy's administrators hope reporters are satisfied, or at least placated. So long as a handout or an approved source keeps a reporter at bay, the real news stays hidden in the bureaucratic labyrinth.

Personifications hide news, but so do many bureaucrats who talk to reporters. They hide news by talking as if they were a human press release of the sort only bureaucrats -- or maybe professors -- can write, and no one can understand.

We can see how bureaucrats at Northern Illinois University have snowed our student reporters. For example, we found out that

> According to Denham, if Comprehensive Health Planning of Northwest Illinois Inc. should find information on surveys due to subsequent findings from previous surveys, an annual implementation plan might be effected in which equipment would be provided to doctors in accordance with their need for the facilities.

What can you say about that? A possible answer was provided by another student whose mind was at the mercy of bureaucratic coding: "The infrastructure hasn't been worked out." We don't know what it means, but we can guess: We're going to need bureaucrats to keep working out that infrastructure.

Bureaucrats have become so adept at coding they no longer need many words to say nothing. They can say it in a few. For instance, a student quoted a local school administrator who said, "Flexibility in curriculum planning is a key ingredient to an authentic education." We lament with Edwin Newman the passing of the simple declarative sentence. For instance, we don't have rain

anymore, we have rain-shower activity that's acting up. And when it rains a bureaucratic code, it pours. Unlike Newman, whose lament comes from a love of simple, clear language, our worry stems from a fear of what might motivate persons to hide messages in a code.

In a story about libraries, we were reading about "model information systems that help provide the information needs of residents." We suggest that if reporters stop allowing people to go to the library and instead permit them to have their information needs met by model information systems, meaning has been lost. When this happens, there's no need to print newspapers or to broadcast radio or television news because there is no communication.

Besides bureaucrats' attempts to hide meaning and to manage news, we believe there is another reason why coding frequently appears in students' papers. The novice who doesn't want to appear to be a novice quickly learns the rules of the game. Appearances become deceptive.

The novice learns to act like one of the crowd. Acting like one of the crowd helps one to be accepted by the crowd. For the slightly frightened student journalist, this acceptance can be a Godsend.

Unfortunately, an easy way to show a bureaucrat you're not an outsider is to talk or to write like a bureaucrat. We think the effect of what sociologists call group pressures is too powerful for many student journalists to resist. This belief is reinforced by many student journalists being unable to resist showing their finished products to their sources. This strengthens any subtle effects the pressures of conformity might have on the student. Bureaucrats often seem unable to think in anything but bureaucratic codes. When they read the language of coding, they are comfortable. We suggest students sense this all too well.

Just like in a bureaucratic memo, sentences our students write often are too long, too convoluted and contain little but vague abstract words. Abstraction is a necessity for bureaucratic coding because abstract words allow many interpretations. If policy-makers would use simple, concrete words in short, declarative sentences, too many people might understand what's being said. This means too many people would be able to hold someone accountable if what was said would happen didn't. Stated in the blunt wisdom of a military maxim, abstract words allow bureaucrats to "cover their asses." Journalists have no business helping them do that.

IDENTIFYING COMPRESSED SENTENCES

The problems of bureaucratic coding do not stop here. Usually by mid-term we have helped students become aware of coding. We have helped them realize they can't write a clear story if they write in styles similar to the codes their sources speak. But here is where the problem arises. Efforts to avoid or to compensate for past errors result in overcompensation. Rather than putting too much in a sentence, students leave too much out. In attempts to reduce bureaucratic codes to journalistic style, students tend to compress essential thoughts out of a sentence.

For example, a student tried to say most of the town's overdue water bills were from residential, not commercial, users. Trying to shorten his sentence, the student combined ideas without realizing the effect on the whole sentence. He ended up with "(Finance Director Calvin) Henry said most of the overdue consumers were household bills, not businesses." Another student wanted to say students were asking DeKalb High School officials to form a girls' football team and a girls' wrestling team. The sentence stated students were "requesting that DeKalb High School have a girls' football and wrestling team." That sport would be interesting to watch. By trying to save words and by not realizing the effect of a conjunction, a student changed two sports into one. Over-

compensating for a tendency to write bureaucratic codes produces sentences just as incoherent as codes.

CONCLUSION

The problems we have discussed in this paper are not new to journalism educators. They are as inevitable as death and taxes.

We have traced these problems to a common source -- faulty thought patterns -- and have analyzed them in a new light. This process of synthesis has helped us recognize the common cause of the various problems we discussed. Teaching with this understanding, we believe we avoid attacking symptoms. We suggest journalistic writing should not be taught through the piecemeal method by which most of us were trained.